

Works of Bunny Harvey, John La Farge shine in two Mass. exhibits

By **Bill Van Sieten** Journal Arts Writer Posted Nov. 8, 2015 @ 12:01 am



The work of John La Farge, a leading figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement, is on display at Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art, through Dec. 13. Many of the artworks in the exhibit were donated by Newport collectors William and Alison Vareika. Courtesy of the McMullen Museum of Art.

As it happens, "Bunny Harvey: Four Decades" isn't the only Bay State exhibit with Ocean State connections on display at the moment. A few miles to the east (and about a 15-minute drive from Wellesley's tree-lined campus), the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College is showcasing a major trove of paintings, drawings and other works by the pioneering 19th-century artist John La Farge.

Once a largely forgotten figure in American art, La Farge has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, with major museum exhibitions and critical works exploring his work in a variety of mediums, including painting, architecture and the decorative arts. Considered a leading figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement, La Farge is also known as the inventor of opalescent glass — a variation on traditional stained glass that allowed artists (including La Farge himself) to create stained-glass panels and windows that approximated the rich colors and 3-D effects of paintings.

While "John La Farge and the Recovery of the Sacred" features several examples of La Farge's work in stained glass, one in particular stands out: a large three-panel window originally commissioned for the All Souls Unitarian Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. At once physically imposing — it's roughly the size of modern-day IMAX screen — and in pristine condition after a recent conservation effort, it's worth the trip up Route 95 all by itself.

The three main figures — a luminous Christ flanked by St. Paul and St. John the Evangelist — practically leap off the wall in a blaze of smoldering reds, blues, golds and greens. What's more, by varying the thickness and transparency of the glass, La Farge was able to give these imposing figures an almost sculptural presence. Rather than simple coloring-book illustrations, they have the heft and mass of actual bodies.

For this and many other works in the show, visitors can thank two Rhode Island collectors: Newport gallery owner William Vareika and his wife, Alison. A 1974 Boston College graduate, Vareika began collecting La Farge's work long before it became fashionable. A few years ago, with the artist's reputation rising again, the Vareikas decided to donate most of their collection to the school and its museum.

The result is both a luminous salute to an American original and a thank-you note to the Vareikas for their generosity.

"John La Farge and the Recovery of the Sacred" continues through Dec. 13 at the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, Mass. For more, visit bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/artmuseum.

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